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AUTHOR	Hoerrner, L. Mark; Hoerrner, Keisha
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ABSTRACT

This article describes the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, a project that strives to encourage children and their parents to think critically when interacting with media messages. The project is one of the few media literacy programs offering programming to both children and parents on issues ranging from tobacco advertising to sex and violence in the movies. (GCP)

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Steering Toward Skepticism: The New Mexico Media Literacy Project

by
L. Mark Hoerrner
Dr. Keisha Hoerrner

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Steering Toward Skepticism: The New Mexico Media Literacy Project

by L. Mark Hoerrner and Dr. Keisha Hoerrner

When Mark Nelson was in pre-kindergarten, he heard a presentation from Bob McCannon, executive director of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project. Mark is almost 9 now—but he still uses what he learned that day. "He still remembers that it is healthier to eat the box that Cap'n Crunch comes in," rather than the sugary cereal itself, says his mother, Bobbi Nelson. So, he doesn't eat it.

Bobbi Nelson and her husband, Rob, were so intrigued by the impact of McCannon's presentation on their son that they decided to attend a similar one for parents. "I was totally impressed," she says. Afterward, she cut back her child's television time, and she herself became a more critical viewer—especially of news programs. "Now I ask myself, 'What are they trying to make me believe?' when I watch," she says.

Why Worry?

Concerns about the effect of television viewing on children and teens aren't new. But with TV now reaching into 99 percent of U.S. households according to the National Association of Broadcasters, and with the rapid growth of other electronic media such as the Internet and video games, those concerns are growing.

"Research has shown primarily negative health effects on violence and aggressive behavior; sexuality; academic performance; body concept and self-image; nutrition, dieting, and obesity; and substance use and abuse patterns," stated the American Academy of Pediatrics when summarizing thousands of studies conducted on children and television in 1995.

Dr. Bradley Greenberg, distinguished professor of communication at Michigan State University, says television today shapes how children behave. Greenberg has authored several textbooks and hundreds of scholarly journal articles and has been in the field of media education since 1958.

"Television tends to dull interpersonal skills," he says. "It doesn't advance social interaction and tends to reinforce aggressive interpersonal behaviors. Television is still the primary conflict resolution device for children, and not in socially constructive ways."

Greenberg explains that children model televised behavior much as they model parental behavior. If they repeatedly see conflicts resolved through violence—as is so often shown on television—children will respond to conflict in their own lives with violence.

Yet, the New Mexico Media Literacy Project and other media literacy organizations—and researchers like Dr. Greenberg—believe television can also benefit children, as long as they are taught to view it with a questioning mind.

What is Media Literacy?

A 1992 media literacy summit, the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, developed this definition of media literacy: "The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms."

A quick search of the Internet brings up dozens of organizations and Web sites dedicated to the topic. Some media literacy organizations are concerned with teaching students how to produce media content; some are concerned with training consumers to "talk back" to television advertisers and programmers; and still others are focusing on educating children and adults about the role mass media play in their lives.

The New Mexico project was initiated in 1993 by former ABC News anchor Hugh Downs and his daughter Deirdre, in partnership with the Albuquerque Academy, a private college preparatory school. Veteran broadcaster Downs did not like the trends he was seeing in television programming. He wanted to foster a project that would educate the public and cause people to turn a more critical eye toward television and eventually all media.

The project, now headed by McCannon, is an outreach program for the Albuquerque Academy, and is also integrated into the curriculum. Funding comes from the state department of education, from foundations, and from local, state and national grants.

The project strives to encourage children and their parents to think critically when interacting with media messages. Since the project began, hundreds of thousands of children have received training on how to effectively watch, evaluate and critique the mass media.

In 2002, the project gave 352 presentations to over 55,000 people nationwide while also spearheading the formation of ACME, the American Coalition of Media Education. Training is held at schools, college campuses, business seminars and other venues.

The project is one of the few media literacy programs offering programming to both children and parents on issues ranging from tobacco advertising to sex and violence in the movies.

Media Savvy Matters

Michigan State's Greenberg says literacy training gives parents of young children the upper hand in shaping their children's media experience. He says informed parents are turning away from traditional network programming both by steering their kids to specialized channels such as Nickelodeon, NOGGIN and the Disney Channel; and by

developing their own pre-screened library of VHS or DVD titles that reflect personal family values on sexual content, violence and language.

"There is absolutely no substitute for parental involvement in the consumption of any form of media," McCannon says. "Media literacy begins in the home. Parents must impart values and positive development in the course of media consumption; otherwise, children can, and do, form their own values based on what they witness on television, in movies and in magazines."

According to McCannon, media have a profound effect on dozens of issues: addictions and health, body image, self-esteem, corporate power, quality of life, stereotyping, employment, wages and more. Once the skills of critical consumption of media are learned, those who have had the training go on to act as media-literate advocates. Some become neighborhood activists, promoting an agenda of "change in the social, political or philosophical realm of their choice," he says.

Lessons Learned

Ginger Whisnant teaches sixth-grade math at the Albuquerque Academy, where NMMLP is housed. She and her daughter took the training several years ago.

"We did it originally because it seemed interesting to us," she said. "The training was 24 hours of instruction in two and a half days. At first, we thought we would never make it through, despite our initial interest. When we finished, we were stunned it had ended so soon."

Her daughter, Jeannie, 22, went through the training while still in high school.

"The training made her a much wiser person," Whisnant says. "But there was something more there in the way she watched television, read magazines and, really, in everything she saw. Regardless of how attractive something looked, she took a critical stance on it."

In parts of Canada, media literacy education is mandatory in schools. But here in the United States, private organizations are leading the charge. A study completed this fall by Dr. Robert Kubey of the Center for Media Studies at Rutgers University for Cable in the Classroom reported that school systems across the country have been slow to embrace the concept. "Thinking Critically about the Media: Schools and Families in Partnership" noted that "most children are not media literate, so they are poorly equipped to engage actively and think critically about the very media that most affect their lives."

Kubey noted in his report that training does make a difference. "Parents often remark that after instruction in media literacy, their children point out things while they watch movies or TV programs. They identify jump cuts, fades and voiceovers. They detect bias and the power of words to shift meaning and of music to alter the viewer's mood," the report continued.

Nelson says her son is living proof of these results. Not only does she never worry about her son asking for Cap'n Crunch, but also doesn't have to worry about him when he reads Harry Potter or watches the movies. "I was talking with another parent about a private school's decision to ban the books," she says, and Mark overheard the conversation. "He said he didn't understand because 'we all know witchcraft isn't real.'"

Resources:

New Mexico Media Literacy Project

Connect for Kids Literacy and Reading

L. Mark Hoermer is a journalist for an Atlanta area newspaper who has previously published freelance articles on children and television issues. His wife, Dr. Keisha Hoermer, is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Kennesaw State University whose primary research interests are children and media. They have two young sons.

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